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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [MO](#)  
SUBJECT: LOW TURNOUT AND VOTE BUYING MARS PARLIAMENTARY  
BY-ELECTIONS

Classified By: PolCouns Craig M. Karp for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: A recent Moroccan special election to fill eight parliamentary seats was marred by low voter turnout and accusations of vote buying. Voter participation in the election, which took place in four Atlantic coast cities, was 27%. Increasing public distrust of the efficacy of political parties and the parliament has created voter apathy and a "culture of abstention" in Morocco. Irregularities aside, the contests were considered a litmus test for the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM), which was formed one month ago by King Mohammed VI confidant Fouad El-Himma. While no single party won more than one seat, PAM's single seat victory, won only by the previous incumbent who had just joined the party, was considered disappointing in the wake of massive media hype. The party trumpeted the fact that it had no special help from the government, a sign of democracy in Morocco, prompting another party's activist to say, "that's not democracy, its cinema." The Islamist-inspired Party of Justice and Development (PJD) also fared poorly, winning no seats, and cried foul, citing vote buying. Despite irregularities, the partial elections appear to signal that absent major consolidation no one party will likely dominate the political spectrum for next year's municipal elections. End Summary.

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Culture of Abstention  
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¶2. (SBU) Moroccan elections to fill eight seats in Morocco's lower house of Parliament on 19 and 21 September were marred by low voter turnout and accusations in the media of wide-spread vote buying. Overall participation in the election, which took place in the cities of Safi (4 seats), Marrakesh (1 seat), Tiznit (1 seat), and Mohamedia (1 seat) was 27% of registered voters. Voter participation in Marrakech, where Embassy and Consular officers observed the elections, was an abysmal 15% of voters. The voting was for districts where the 2007 Parliamentary vote was annulled because of irregularities, largely alleged vote buying.

¶3. (SBU) Apart from an increasing atmosphere of cynicism about the efficacy of political parties and the parliament among the Moroccan population, most analysts ascribed the particularly low voter turnout to the partial nature of the elections and bad timing, i.e., during Ramadan and on a Friday, when Muslims have added religious obligations. Senior executive member of the leading socialist party Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) Driss Lachgar said in a television interview after the election that political life in Morocco has been spoiled by parties not keeping their promises to the electorate, which has created apathy and a "culture of abstention." Moroccan participation in parliamentary elections since approximately 2002 has been steadily declining, as exemplified by the last full parliamentary election cycle in September which saw a record low 37% participation rate.

## ----- Accusations of Vote Buying and Collusion -----

14. (SBU) Ironically, the partial elections were held in an effort to rectify spoiled elections from September 2007, which had been canceled in the eight districts in question because of accusations of vote buying. Sadly, eight out of the eight victors of the partial election had been previously implicated in the vote buying irregularities of 2007. In addition to mutual accusations of vote buying among all of the participating political parties, media reports and Embassy contacts reported collusion activity among unnamed parties toward divvying up political wins and losses. This may partly explain why spoils of the election were so evenly distributed among the winning parties.

15. (SBU) Among the biggest problems at the root of vote buying and low voter turnout is Morocco's inadequate education system, which has resulted in large number of poor and illiterate citizens, poorly equipped to make informed votes. One of our leading academic contacts described this group, estimated to be over 40% in the countryside, as "massive, blind, and without memory." In an atmosphere of low public confidence in political parties and the parliament, many within this poor and ill-informed demographic opt for taking something tangible away from the electoral process: money.

16. (SBU) Another perpetuating element of vote buying remains the predominance of an atmosphere of opportunism among politicians. According to the same contact, the elites of the country are no longer societal leaders of the country

but rather opportunists vying with each other for coveted positions. Morocco has no "great person" politicians, no system of merit, and no sense of teamwork; clientalism supersedes societal concerns.

## ----- No Party Breaks from the Pack; Seen as a Disappointment for PAM -----

17. (SBU) The results of the election were diffuse, with eight different parties winning each of the contested seats (see paragraph 12 for details). Despite the low voter turnout, media coverage of the elections was disproportionately intense, mainly because many saw the elections as a litmus test for the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM), a political party founded one month ago by palace-intimate Fouad El-Himma. Critics attributed PAM's winning only one seat as a public rejection of PAM because of its widely believed connections to the palace. Still other Embassy contacts attributed PAM's poor performance to tabling poor candidates which included "retread leftists and political novices," and PAM's "big tent" recruiting approach, which prevented the party from forming a coherent political message.

18. (SBU) PAM supporters, including PAM executive council member Khadija Rouissi, countered that the media had set expectations too high. "A one-month old party cannot be expected to make inroads quickly against geographically entrenched parties, some of which are 50 years old," she argued. She also told Embassy Deputy Polcouns that the party's modest showing was evidence that it was not a "palace party," as its detractors claim, and that it had not engaged in vote buying.

## ----- Parties Reacting to Vote Buying Backlash -----

19. (SBU) Using the vote-buying allegations as a foil, Rouissi told Deputy Polcouns that PAM would likely finalize its plans to establish an executive, finance, and ethics committee at its party Congress in November. She said that

the establishment of these committees would further strengthen PAM's structure and ability to monitor party performance. She said that the ethics committee would be independent of the executive committee, in order to increase its objectivity, and would be empowered to investigate incidents of vote buying and other electoral transgressions.

¶10. (U) After the partial election, USFP Party Secretariat General Candidate Driss Lachgar (the most outspoken critic of El-Himma and his party, perhaps outside of the PJD, invited other political parties to join his party in what he termed a "Block for the Defense of Democracy," for those parties ostensibly committed to corruption-free elections. While rhetorically welcomed, Lachgar did not elaborate on any mechanism that might give "teeth" to the block. Lachgar also subtly implied that PAM might not be welcome in such a group, given its alleged association to the palace. PJD Secretary General Benkirane quickly voiced his party's support for joining the group, according to the press.

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Islamist-Inspired Party Licks its Wounds  
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¶11. (U) The PJD was unable to secure a single seat in the partial elections, resulting in press speculation that the party's appeal is waning. PJD defenders, however, countered that redistricting, stemming back to the 2007 elections, continued to unfairly bias the PJD at the ballot box by mixing urban districts, where the PJD is traditionally strong, and rural districts, where the PJD is relatively weaker. Other PJD militants cited the poor showing as evidence that the PJD was not engaged in vote buying (Note: the PJD is widely considered to be the most uncorrupted of Morocco's political parties). Several political analyst contacts of the Embassy agreed that the elections, while by no means conclusive, may indicate that the PJD may be settling into a more fixed position, in terms of its base of support within the Moroccan political spectrum after nearly a decade of rapid growth.

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Election Results: Winners by District and Party  
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¶12. (U) The following are the official results of the 2008 partial parliamentary elections by district.

--District of Safi (4 seats): Mohamed Karim (Istaqlal Party); Mohamed Ajdia (Party of Socialist Union Forces); Ahmed El Ajili (Workers Party); Omar Mouhib (Social Democratic Union)

--District of Gueliz-Ennakhil (i.e., Marakech): Abdellah Rafouch (Constitutional Union)

--District of Tiznit: Said Benmbarek (Party of Authenticity and Modernity)

--District of Mohamedia: Mohamed Atwahi (Rally of National Independents Party)

¶13. (C) Comment: The seemingly endemic problem of vote buying in Morocco will likely be with us the foreseeable future. While Moroccan laws adequately "criminalize" the practice, it is still difficult to prove and prosecute. Until the mass of Morocco's population can be lifted out of poverty and illiteracy, the system will remain highly vulnerable. Given the relatively small number of seats involved, extrapolation from this partial election for the 2009 municipal elections remains limited, but it does appear to confirm our impression that the government and parties have done little in the last year to inspire the voters who turned away from the 2007 election in droves. It also suggests that no one party is likely to dominate the next year's elections. This is likely to increase the importance of alliance building and party mergers among the parties over the next year. PAM's underwhelming performance in the

partial elections was followed by an announcement on September 29th that it would form a political alliance with the Rally of National Independents Party. In addition to gaining allies, PAM appears to have much work to do in connecting with the "man on the street," rather than relying on its current posture of simply portraying itself as the "un-PJD" party.

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